

Ex-King Seen Developing Dictatorship in Cambodia

By GERALD WARING

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia. — A new dictatorship, presumably benevolent, appears to be developing in this Indo-Chinese kingdom, with former King Norodom Sihanouk holding the real power as prime minister to his father, King Norodom Suramarit.

The 32-year-old Prince Sihanouk describes his plans for constitutional changes as the basis for a new kind of democracy which will express the will of the people.

Informed sources here say that Sihanouk's program, which he can implement because his Sangkum Party took all 91 seats in the September 11 election for the National Assembly, is based on his belief that Cambodia's 4 million people are not ready for and do not want the party system of parliamentary government practiced by Western nations.

Under Cambodia's 1947 constitution, which has proven unworkable, the people elect the members of the National Assembly. However, the constitution may be amended by a two-thirds vote of the assembly, and since all the assemblymen are Sihanouk's adherents, the prince is preparing to proceed immediately with his program of "constitutional reform."

Under this program, the people will elect only their village leaders. Collectively these village mayors will compose 14 provincial legislatures—new bodies which will be created. Members of the National Assembly, renamed the People's Assembly, will be chosen by the provincial legislatures.

One-Man Rule

Moreover, the assembly will not have control over the administration. This is a prerogative Sihanouk is reserving for himself, either as prime minister, the post he has accepted for three months, or in his official capacity through his personal control of the government. But while the assembly will not be able to overthrow the government, it will have the right to veto individual cabinet members or oust individual ministers for cause.

Competent western observers say Sihanouk's plan to end the system of parliamentary government from the top and make a new one from the bottom, the creation of local mayors will not be a step toward loss of the right to elect assemblymen directly. Real power, they point out, is not at the level of government, but at the national level.

They say, the program will set the stage for Sihanouk to run Cambodia. And general opinion here is that he is the only man who can do the job. As the experienced western diplomat put it, the choice isn't between democracy and dictatorship as the Western World understands it. It's between a benevolent dictatorship at the hands of Sihanouk, and political chaos at the hands of the corrupt oligarchy which formerly ruled Cambodia.

Uncertainty Over

Ever since the September 11 election day ended much of the political uncertainty which followed Sihanouk's abdication five months ago in favor of his parents. At that time he had promised an election to give Cambodians a chance to approve or disapprove his actions during three years of personal rule, when the constitution was virtually suspended.

He had already held a referendum, in February, to let the people decide on retention or abolition of the monarchy, and 99.83 per cent of the votes cast were reported to have been for the monarchy. Thus encouraged, Sihanouk welded various royalist parties and other political factions into the Sangkum Party in hope of getting a parlia-

mentary majority of two-thirds the seats to enable him to implement his plans for constitutional reform.

When the 10-week election campaign started the odds seemed heavily against the prince. The Democrat (socialist) Party, which had won the previous three elections, had a strong machine, a rather advanced social welfare program for this backward country, and much ammunition arising out of Sihanouk's seizure of absolute power in 1952.

Prince's Reply

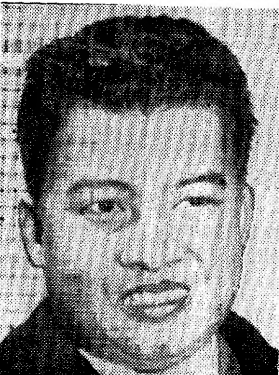
The prince countered by saying one of his main aims was the abolition of corruption, and charging that the Democrats and the Communists were against American aid because they wanted to keep Cambodia weak. Then the chubby young prince proved again that he is a bold and shrewd politician. He had outmaneuvered the French to win Cambodian independence in 1953, and he outmaneuvered the Democrats by turning the election into another referendum on the monarchial system. He sent police and government administrators throughout the country, informing the people that the real election issue was whether they wanted the king or not.

To most of his "little people," as he calls them, Norodom Sihanouk is still the king. He had his portrait put on the ballots as the symbol of his party, while the Democrats used an elephant. His ward heelers asked people if they wanted to be ruled by a man or an elephant, but that was scarcely necessary. Eighty-five per cent of the people who voted picked ballots picturing the man they call king—a man who now has more real power than any king has had in this country since the French established their sway here a century ago.

Sihanouk's popular vote might have been even greater if the Democrats hadn't persuaded some voters to put the portrait of their beloved ex-king next to their hearts, and "throw away the Democratic ballot" by putting it in the ballot box.

Westerners here believe Sihanouk might be a great Asiatic leader if he had a big country behind him. But his people not only are few; they also are among the most indolent in the East. They have no incentive to work once their simple needs are met. One of the challenges facing Sihanouk is the need to instill new economic aggressiveness in his people. Another is to reduce corruption and venality among politicians and administrative officials who make up a sizeable part of the country's middle class.

And then there is the problem of national security, with the Communist-led Viet Minh not far away, in North Viet Nam. Cambodia is rich agricultural land. It might support 10 million people, and the Reds eye it avidly. The Americans, the British and others here are banking on Sihanouk's determination not to let them have it.



Norodom Sihanouk